

Statement of Dr. John Kitzmiller
Senate forum on buprenorphine
June 18, 2014

I was a vascular surgeon for 30 years in Michigan. Starting in 1985, I began a series of 10 back surgeries on myself over about a 20-year time period. And during that time obviously, I took opiates, and abused opiates and became addicted to opiates. In 2007, which was around my 8th back surgery, I think, I was still practicing vascular surgery, my son was in Iraq fighting, and my father had just died and I was living at home.

It was about two weeks after my surgery and I didn't really care about anything at that point. I would wake up and take some more opiates and go back to bed and kind of hope I didn't wake up. My office manager called me one day and she said, "Would you be willing to go into treatment?" and I said, "Yes, I would." So I went to Brighton Hospital in Michigan and I was there for four months. And they were using Suboxone then, and I was discharged from the hospital on Suboxone and was doing very well.

My spine surgeon said I could no longer do surgery; just couldn't stand at the operating table anymore, so it was time to move on and find something else to do. I was too young to retire. I went back to school and got a master's in psychology. I think I was 60 or 59, and that's actually where I met my wife – she was one of my teachers. I was still on Suboxone during my master's program. And I thought, "You know, I'm doing well. I don't really need to take this, and I'm fine." And I stopped. And I think it was within three or four months that I was back on opiate medication. The urge or the craving to take the medication is so incredible – and that's one of the major, really the major issue. Suboxone or buprenorphine helps get through withdrawal, but probably more importantly, it takes away cravings for opiates and that seems to be an ongoing problem for opiate addicts. So I started back on Suboxone and I take it now and I've been taking it.

But I had essentially lost everything. I lost; I couldn't work anymore. I lost my home. And it has allowed me to come back and have a very active medical practice taking care of people with chronic pain and opiate addiction and has returned me to, I think, a functioning member of society.

Obviously, I have a lot of patient stories like everybody else does, but one comes to mind. I'm seeing a couple – husband and wife – who are both heroin addicts. And they're on Suboxone now. But, interestingly enough, I'm seeing their son. They've been on Suboxone now seven months and they're doing very well. But I'm seeing their son from a psychology point of view. He's 17 and in high school. He told me the other day, that every day walking home from high school he was afraid he was going to come home to his parents being dead on the floor. Now his parents are doing very, very well. They're both working and he's doing much better, too.

But it's a drug that allows us to lead a normal life. We can't lead a normal life on opiates. You can't lead a normal life on methadone. But you can take Suboxone and lead an absolutely normal lifestyle. And I wanted to share that with people.